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ABSTRACT

This report is a brief introduction to the findings of a research project that examined the impact of abuse on women's literacy learning and explored approaches to literacy programming in the light of these impacts. Interviews were conducted with literacy workers, learners, and counselors to determine the impact of abuse they saw in their work and how literacy programs could address the impact of violence. Following an introduction there is a section that discusses violence and trauma. The next section covers the issues of control, connection, and meaning and how they can be incorporated into a literacy program. The connections between literacy and therapy are then explored. Next an examination is made of new possibilities for literacy practice in light of the impact that violence can have on learning. The last section discusses how to create balance among mind, body, emotion, and spirit through literacy programs. All of these sections are followed by a list of possible actions that can be taken by literacy programs and organizations. (ADT)

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ED 461 078

"But I'm Not a Therapist"

Furthering Discussion about Literacy Work with Survivors of Trauma

by
Jenny Horsman

This is intended as a discussion paper. I invite you to engage with it, in particular, with the "Possible Actions" noted, which are ideas for literacy programming. Would they work in your context? Are you already trying any of them? Would you like to try any? Does this report suggest other ideas for action to you? Tell me about your reactions.

For this research I interviewed many literacy workers, but of course there are many more workers that I was not able to speak to[1]. I encourage you to add your voice and your reactions to the study. Contact me. I will incorporate your ideas into further writing on this theme.

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This material may be copied and distributed for discussion purposes. Please circulate widely.

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[1] This paper is informed by the wisdom of more than one hundred and fifty literacy learners and workers, therapists, counsellors and others who participated in this study. Because I talked to so many people, there is not space here to credit each person when I drew from their ideas, although I learned from every person. I initially thought I could give names when the idea came from one person, but I realized where several people offered a similar description, the list of names would be too unwieldy. Whether ideas were described by one or many they were equally crucial to this analysis, so I did not want to include some names and leave others out. I did include footnotes to acknowledge those whose input made a whole section possible or shaped the overall direction of the paper. I hope that this paper honours and reflects the accumulated experience and collective wisdom of all who spoke (or wrote) to me. The names of all who participated will be listed in an in-depth account of the research which I hope to publish in 1998.

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1. Introductions

Background to the Research

This report is a brief introduction to the findings of a research project sponsored by The Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women (CCLOW) and funded by the National Literacy Secretariat. Begun in October 1996, the research examined the impacts of abuse on women's literacy learning[2] and explored approaches to literacy programming in the light of these impacts.

Many years of research and practice in literacy, led me to a belief in the crucial need for research that would lead to more awareness and more talk about women's experience of violence and its impact on their literacy learning as adults. I argued in my proposal for funding:

> If the impacts of violence are not adequately addressed in literacy programs there is a cost for learners, as they face barriers to successful learning; a cost to literacy workers, as they are frustrated by lack of knowledge about how best to support survivors in overcoming barriers to learning; and a cost to programs as a whole, as learners struggle to participate effectively as leaders sharing in running their programs.

As I talked to learners and workers, the frustration of learners who feel their failure to learn proves they are stupid, and of workers who feel incompetent and question what they could do better, confirmed the need for this study, and for changes to literacy work.

The Research Process

I interviewed literacy workers, learners, counsellors and therapists who were interested in reflecting on their concerns and experiences in relation to issues of violence and adult literacy learning. My main questions for interviewees were:

1. What impacts of abuse do you see in your literacy program/your work?
2. How can/should literacy programs address these impacts of violence?

I identified key contacts in five regions (B.C., Prairies, Central Canada, Atlantic, and North) who identified women interested in talking to me. Over several months, I interviewed a wide variety of literacy workers, literacy learners, therapists, counsellors and staff in various organizations in focus group sessions,

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[2] This study focussed on women's experience of violence. Further studies are needed to explore the particularities of men's experience. However, many of the implications for literacy programming for women emerging from this research would also strengthen men's literacy learning.

individual interviews and through computer networks. Overall, I talked to approximately one hundred and fifty people, mostly women[3].

As I talked to group after group of workers and learners, I was able to check out ideas from earlier interviews with the next group. I brought information from my sessions with counsellors and therapists to sessions with literacy workers, in order to explore whether the discourses of literacy work might obscure some impacts of violence, and whether therapeutic discourses might help reveal impacts that had previously gone unnoticed. The information gradually became more "layered", as women agreed and disagreed with each other, and responded to the analysis I began to make of what I was hearing.

The Deficit Model

There is a common tendency in literacy work to slide into a deficit model. In societies where literacy is highly valued and part of schooling, it is easy for literacy work to frame the learner as the "problem", with a deficit of skills, and to lose awareness of the learners' strengths and knowledge, and of the socially-framed nature of the problem. In the deficit model, only the individual literacy learner needs to change, society can be left unaltered. This approach suggests that the learner simply needs to improve her literacy skills to fit into society, the "problems" will be solved and she will have access to social mobility in the "meritocracy." Analogies of literacy as a sickness or disease to be eradicated often signal this deficit approach.

During the process of the study I was enthralled by what I learned from the therapeutic field and how it could help us to work differently in literacy. However, I also struggled to avoid the ways in which that discourse could be a slippery slope to new deficit models for literacy work with those who have experienced violence. A therapeutic focus simply on individual "healing", implies that the person is sick and can be well. Ora Avni's words, as she speaks of survivors of the holocaust, state this strongly:

> Yes, we want to "heal". Society wants to heal; history wants to heal. But, no, a simple "life goes on", "tell your story", "come to terms with your pain", or "sort out your ghosts" will not do. It will not do, because the problem lies not

[3] The depth and length of "talk" varied widely, from as little as one interaction on a computer conference to as much as a weekend retreat, but most contacts were a single two to three hour meeting. Overall I interviewed nine groups of literacy workers (some groups also included counsellors and people from other organizations) and met with some workers individually or in twos or threes from one program. I also interviewed five groups of literacy learners. I interviewed ten counsellors and therapists individually, but a few more participated in groups with literacy workers.

> in the individual--survivor or not--but in his or her interaction with society... (Avni, 1995, p.216)

Sandra Butler has also eloquently critiqued "individualized, de-contextualized, and de-politicized healing" (1992).

My study has revealed that "healing" is not an individual problem. It may not even be "abnormal" in this society for women to have experienced trauma. The goal of literacy work with those who have experienced trauma should not be simply to support their "healing" or to help them become well, or "normal." The study is not intended to encourage literacy workers to believe that they must learn to diagnose who has been traumatized and then treat them differently from other learners. Trauma survivors should not be seen as "poor souls" in need of healing. But, it is the responsibility of literacy workers, funders and others in the field to recognize that all literacy learning must be carried out in recognition of the needs of survivors of trauma. Those needs should be "normalized" as an everyday part of the literacy program. What those "needs"[4] look like and how they could influence literacy work will be examined in the rest of this paper.

2. Exploring Violence and Trauma

Violence

In my interviews I heard about an enormous range of violence. I was told about childhood violence in the home and in school, about adult violence in relationships and in the classroom, and about the ways in which current and past violence impinged on the safety of learners and workers and on women's learning as adults. Workers frequently talked of how isolated they felt with the stories of violence, of their knowledge of the absence of safety for students, and of their fears that they, too, were not safe. I was disturbed by the prevalence of the stories and by the statistics about women and girls' experience of violence, which suggest that the experience of violence, rather than freedom from it, is "normal."

For some women violence already present in their lives "follows" them to school. Instructors, learners and counsellors spoke of situations where women's decision to return to school had caused an escalation in the violence from the men in their lives. One worker said that when women get "uppity", male violence increases. Women may have decided to return to school in preparation to escape violence,

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[4] I want also to recognize throughout this study that, not only learners are survivors of trauma, but also literacy workers. Such experience will have impact on their work and teaching, just as learners' experiences have impact on their learning.

but the immediate result is often that the violence gets worse. As the woman empowers herself, the man feels minimized and seeks to dominate by escalating his violence. This experience may lead women to drop out of the program. I heard of women who were being stalked - trying to learn while their husband was outside the school waiting for them - and of women who were struggling to continue to attend school and to learn, in the face of deepening violence. Many literacy workers spoke of knowing that women's erratic attendance was often due to violence. Absences may be caused by men refusing women "permission" to attend regularly (or to do homework) or by men's physical attacks which can leave women ashamed to attend school with bruises that would reveal their situation, or with the injuries and ill-health that make attendance impossible. One worker said:

> Another student just isn't coming because she's been beaten up so badly she can't walk!! I have seven women in this class - I know four are dealing with this stuff.

In programs where regular attendance is required to maintain a place or where students are funded, students who are experiencing violence can be dropped off support or out of the program, labelled as not "serious" or not ready to learn.

Women working with immigrant women, especially refugees, spoke about women who have left war-torn countries and who have experienced the violence and horror of attacks on themselves and their families. Some have endured arrest, imprisonment and torture. One counsellor spoke of such women dealing with flashbacks, nightmares, disrupted sleep and depression as a result of their experiences and at the same time coping with problems of settling in a new country. They are too exhausted to learn. Immigrant women also have added deterrents against leaving violent partners. They may fear being alone in a foreign land, the disapproval of their community or experience difficulty with language. Language barriers, unfamiliarity with the system, fear of the police all make it harder or impossible for some immigrant women to access shelters or the "protection" offered by the legal system. If women have been sponsored by their spouse, they may fear being sent back to their country of origin, and may not be eligible for assistance in Canada. English programs for new immigrants do not routinely explain practical resources, such as shelters, when they are introducing other aspects of life in Canada.

Deaf students are also particularly vulnerable to abuse and to control by family members and spouses. Deaf women lacking literacy skills have less access to television, radio or books to learn information about resources or to learn information that might help them to value themselves. Workers suggested that the most common issue for Deaf women was control: control of their children, their

cheques, their own movements. Workers in the Deaf community talked about their frustration of not knowing how to support women who were controlled and dependent with little say over their own lives. In particular, women who have not had the opportunity to learn American Sign Language can remain dependent on family members or spouses to interpret for them, making it harder for them to resist the ways they are controlled.

Intellectual disabilities can also increase women's vulnerability. Intellectually disabled women are more likely to be targeted on the street, and be dependent on care givers in the home or in group homes. Caregivers may be abusive. Even the assumption that a person cannot do something, may limit their potential to learn and decrease their self-esteem. The dependence women have on their caregivers may make it difficult for them to complain about any level of abuse, put-down, or exclusion and the consistency of such treatment may mean it is all they know, and so appears "normal". Adult learners who were labelled intellectually disabled as children and sterilized without their consent, or placed in institutions where they were mistreated in many ways, are not uncommon in literacy programs.

Workers who worked with women who were homeless spoke of the ways in which men pull women in an out of homelessness. The line between being homeless or not may be as simple as whether they are in a relationship with a man who has accommodation. In Ontario, if women on social assistance have a male partner, or share accomodation with a man, the social assistance cheque usually goes to the male - unless the woman can prove he is not paying the rent - giving him complete control of their joint income[5]. The dependence this entails makes women more vulnerable to abuse. Workers talked about the tension between men as defenders of "their" women from other men on the streets AND also as their abusers.

Trauma

During the study, I shifted from speaking about "violence" to using the term "trauma." When I spoke of violence I was continually asked what particular form of violence I was talking about. I preferred the term trauma, as the emphasis of the term is on the reaction of the person, and draws the focus away from the degree or amount of violence experienced. Judith Herman provides a clear definition of trauma:

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[5] Although women who receive disability allowances, or who can show that there are chronic problems in paying the rent, may be able to receive their own cheques, recent legislative changes will make it harder for women to avoid the judgment that they are living in a "spousal" situation with a man, who is always judged to be the "head of household."

> Traumatic events overwhelm the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection and meaning. Traumatic events are extraordinary, not because they occur rarely, but because they overwhelm the ordinary human adaptations to life... They confront human beings with the extremities of helplessness and terror and evoke the responses of catastrophe. (Herman, 199 p.33)

However, this therapeutic term created its own problems by taking attention away from the agent that causes the trauma. The therapeutic literature draws attention to the impact of trauma, which leads a person to experience subsequent violence as also traumatic.

> They have an elevated baseline of arousal: their bodies are always on the alert for danger. They also have an extreme startle response to unexpected stimuli, as well as an intense reaction to specific stimuli associated with the traumatic event. (Herman, p. 36)

This awareness seems valuable to help workers realize that loud and aggressive talk in the classroom, for example, might evoke extreme terror in some learners, or to notice that many learners, as they told me, experience government pressure to get into the workforce as controlling and terrifying. Learners described how it brought back earlier experiences of being abusively controlled. However, therapeutic literature suggests that this sensitivity is abnormal in comparison with some assumed "normal" level of arousal. Events which provoke a reaction are described as "minor stimuli" (van der Kolk et al. p.3). The perspective on how major the stimuli "really" are, is that of someone who has not experienced trauma. The survivor would not describe the stimuli as "minor." I think it is crucial to be able to recognize therapeutic descriptions of the impact of trauma to understand major reactions to levels of violence (that some might see as minor), AND also to question the implication that "healing" from trauma is a process of no longer reacting "unreasonably," and of moving from abnormal to normal.

Canaries in the Mine

The concept of survivors as the "canaries in the mine" helps to shift the unproblematic sense of what is ordinary and healthy, and whose judgment of how serious the violence is should count[6]. Miners carried canaries (or sometimes other birds) into a mine to provide an early warning system for lethal gas. The birds were more sensitive than humans to the gas - low levels were toxic to them.

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[6] Thanks to Susan Heald (1997) for this concept of the canaries in the mine, and for many discussions that helped me see how easily I can slip into accepting uproblematically what is normal and abnormal and seeing health as no longer "overreacting".

When the birds keeled over, they were not seen as overreacting. Their reaction to the gas was a valuable warning. Even though the miners could not sense the gas, it was present, and they knew they should leave the mine before the levels also became lethally toxic to them. If we view traumatized women's reaction to "lower" levels of violence as a warning that violence is toxic to us all, rather than assessing that women need to lessen their reactions and get them under control, we would see those reactions as useful warnings that societal violence needs to be brought under control. Several survivors I interviewed described the sensitivity they felt they had gained from experiencing trauma as a valuable asset. They spoke, for example, of their sensitivity to "reading" the danger in a situation, or their ability to sense someone's intentions. Some suggested that their experience would be very different if their sensitivity were valued and sought out, rather than feeling that they must hide it and act "normal," disguising their discomfort.

In the literacy field, as in the rest of society, there seems to be little focus on the extent of women's experiences of violence. This silence allows the preservation of the implication that a "normal" life is one in which violence is not experienced.

Possible Actions:

- Programs/literacy organizations and networks could initiate and encourage discourse about violence in women's lives both outside and inside the classroom so that an awareness of the issues is built into all programming. This might include a whole range of ways of making the issues visible, such as: workshops for staff, volunteers and learners, posters, emergency phone numbers on view, safety audits and strategies, materials, curriculum on issues of violence..... .
- Review attendance policies and program expectations to ensure that they do not create further barriers to the participation of women who are experiencing, or have experienced, violence.
- Examine program approaches and policies to assess whether they perpetuate women's dependence and vulnerability or support women in developing greater personal power.
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3. Looking at Learning in the Face of Trauma

As mentioned, Judith Herman's definition of trauma states that trauma is caused by events which "overwhelm the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection and meaning" (Herman, 1992, p.33). Many writers have suggested that therapy for trauma victims should be directed at helping the survivor to regain a sense of control, meaning and connection in her life. This observation helps us see where an overlap between literacy and therapy may occur, even if programs are not aware that learners have experienced trauma or that the literacy involvement can be therapeutic. Issues of control, connection and meaning are central to literacy learning.

Control

Trauma entails being controlled by others and being out of your own control. One of the effects of trauma is that control becomes a complex and difficult terrain. Seeing that women continue to struggle with control - feeling that they can't have it, trying to hold on to it, not wanting to be responsible - may be crucial to understanding some of the interactions which take place in a literacy program. This might begin to reveal why many of our approaches in literacy often lead to explosions, conflict and various tensions and difficulties. Many literacy programs seek to be learner-centred, to encourage learners to set goals and take a role in running programs by sitting on committees and boards of directors. All these processes take learners into that same fraught terrain of control, but at best, only limited support is provided for learners to learn to navigate their own processes of being effectively in control. Asking learners to "take control," while failing to help them to explore safely what that means or support them in learning about control, sets learners up for failure. Yet what adequate support would look like, has yet to be explored.

Several literacy workers talked about the importance of the program putting as much control into learners' hands as possible, at the same time as exploring questions of control with learners. Depending on the structure of the program learners may be able to start and stop when they choose, to move on to new work, or back to old when they are ready, to choose whether to follow up their own interests or work on class material. At the bare minimum, when learners start and stop, perhaps several times, it is important that program workers recognize that they may be exploring taking control, and leaving when they are uncomfortable. A literacy worker may need to be cautious, not to push someone to continue, or to reject and judge them for stopping. The stance that respects a learner's choice AND maintains a link to encourage her to return is a sensitive balance.

Supporting learners in learning how to control their own pace of work and choose the work they are ready for can be an important step in exploring control for many learners. Recognizing the importance of learner control might suggest that a program which encourages learners to be fully in control of their own learning would be an ideal method for learners to regain a sense of control. However, counsellors and therapists often suggested that too much freedom can be scary and difficult, particularly for those who have not had much experience being in control. It may also be that a program which looks structureless and open for learners to control has hidden layers of expectations and judgments about what "proper" participation looks like. A combination of boundaries, structure and freedom for a student to exercise some control may be a crucial, but difficult, balance to find. The challenge of teaching learners to set goals and make choices needs to be part of the literacy learning.

Connection

Learners and workers spoke often of the value of the literacy group as a place of connections. But the connections around shared experience of violence are not often made. When I interviewed one group of learners, one learner did not want to be part of the group, she said she was too scared to talk in a group. However she came at the group time by mistake and was quickly drawn in by the other students. She began to tell her story and they told pieces of their stories to help her believe that she too would come through and could cope alone with small children. By the end of the session they had exchanged phone numbers and agreed to babysit each others' children and offer whatever support was needed. These women showed the value of connection for support to help each other "hang in there" when school, single parenting, living on welfare, dealing with stalkers and intrusive memories all felt too much. But they were all adamant that if a support group for survivors was held they would not go because they would not want to be seen attending. They said they were scared to be seen coming to the interview session and had ducked in the door quickly hoping no one would see them. Yet the value of connecting with others with a shared experience was clear, when they quickly stopped talking to me and began talking to each other.

Connection requires trust. Speaking/listening and reading/writing are also about connection to others and trust that it is possible to communicate something. Several learners talked about the "smiling face" as a way of hiding the pain that they were experiencing. They spoke of not telling or writing about their abuse in the program because they wanted to protect those who had not experienced violence from the horror of hearing about such experiences, and because they were afraid that they would be judged. During the interview session I held with members of a women-only group that had been working together for some time, one woman spoke about her experiences of violence for the first time. At the end of the session she talked about how good she felt to have spoken out and

immediately began to write. She gave me a copy and later turned her writing into a piece for publication in a collection of student writings.

During the interview session she, and other women, talked about how hard it is to share such stories of violence with other women. This led to workers suggesting that workshops would be useful to educate everyone about issues of violence. Workshops might help all program members to be sensitive to the range of needs of those who have experienced violence. Participants might be less likely to judge survivors critically, less likely to ask: "Why don't you (or why didn't you) just leave?" and be more prepared to change their own behaviour if necessary, in order to help make the program a safer place for everyone to build trust and make connections.

Meaning

The loss of meaning in life that Herman refers to may also lead learners to have difficulty dreaming of possibilities or imagining goals. Learners often have difficulty trusting their own knowledge, perhaps not surprisingly, as there is so little support in society for the meanings many women make from their standpoint. Many learners have enormous difficulty finding meaning in a text, even when they are able to decipher the words. Much of this difficulty may be about limited vocabulary, and lack of experience with a wide variety of words, but the concept of loss of "meaning"suggests new questions. For women who have experienced violence, it is particularly crucial that they have opportunities to name their own experiences, create their own meanings of their lives and have those meanings validated. Such work might support learners to generate complex and relevant goals and meanings in texts and in life.

Conclusion

Some literacy workers suggested that learners who have issues they need to "heal" should be referred to a therapist or counsellor. For some women that may not be an option: they may feel it is not acceptable to spend time on their own needs; there may be no appropriate counselling available in their community or the form of counselling available may not be a mode they can work with. Some women may have worked on their issues from trauma, or they may be accessing counselling at the same time, but the issues do not simply go away because the session is for "literacy" not "therapy". Several literacy workers spoke strongly about the need for a recognition that issues that surface in literacy may need to be addressed there (perhaps as well as being addressed elsewhere) and an awareness that even if learners do not disclose histories of abuse, issues that result may still be present in the literacy group and program. Programming needs to be designed to take into account the possibility that control, meaning and connection may be complex and difficult terrain for many women and creative approaches need to be

developed to help women to explore these difficult areas. Learners may be healing through their participation in the literacy context and the creative possibilities incorporated into the learning process may simultaneously enhance learning AND healing.

Possible Actions:

- Initiate discussion in the literacy community about issues of control, meaning and connection and the implications for all aspects of literacy work.
- Open up discussion in classes, groups and programs widely about control and difficulties with control.
- Create openness to allowing learners to pace their own learning in a variety of ways.
- Generate creative options to make it possible for learners to control their learning within a structured framework. Eg. Team teaching to create "inhale" and "exhale" rooms, where learners can make their own choice whether to "inhale" new material or "exhale" their own work, or work they want to finish.
- Create clarity about expectations and clear guidelines for learners in less structured situations.
- Offer workshops to teach processes of making choices, visioning and building towards goal setting and taking control over learning.
- Explore the implications of issues of control, meaning and connection for learner leadership activities and participatory education practices broadly in literacy programs and networks.
- Assess possibilities for forming viable support discussion groups for women learners/survivors and facilitate the start up of such groups.
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4. Exploring Connections Between Literacy and Therapy

Linking Literacy and Counselling or Therapy

Many questions were raised as I thought about the needs of survivors of trauma and the resources that might support their literacy learning. Should there be links between literacy and counselling?. If so what form should "links" between these two areas of work take? Should literacy workers refer students to counselling? Should counselling be offered in conjunction with literacy programming? Should literacy workers be able to provide counselling?

I heard repeatedly about workers who felt pressured to counsel and support students in crisis and who felt inadequately prepared or trained to do so. I heard often of learners (sometimes from learners themselves) overwhelmed by their experiences of violence in the present or the past, and that they considered such experience a barrier to learning. I was told that learners often had nowhere to take these accounts. It therefore seemed crucial that literacy programs recognize that some learners will be dealing with issues of trauma and may need access to culturally appropriate counselling. To respond to this need, the minimum that programs must do is to thoroughly assess what counselling is available in their community. This would enable them to offer adequate referrals to suitable services, for learners who are struggling with issues that might make counselling appropriate.

Workers should ideally also assess what capacity is needed within the program to foster good links to the counselling services in the community and to provide solid support for learners who continue in the program while they also seek counselling. Where existing services are inadequate or inaccessible, programs could offer counselling in the program independently or in collaboration with local counselling services. During the study it became clear that although a wide range of types of counselling and therapy exist, services available for free are often extremely limited. Often only short-term or group counselling is available at no charge and there are frequently lengthy waiting lists.

Interviews with counsellors, therapists and staff connected with the shelter movement made clear how little awareness of literacy issues many people in this field have. Current shifts within the shelter movement to consider offering a broad range of services in a storefront setting, led some of the women I interviewed to suggest that they needed to think through possible links, both for referrals to literacy programs and for the types of educational groups they should offer on-site. Literacy workers and learners should educate the shelter movement about existing literacy programming and explore educational links with shelters.

There is also a need for education for counsellors and therapists about literacy issues, so that a lack of awareness of the limited literacy skills of many women, or belief in common stereotypes and prejudices about illiteracy and "illiterates," do not shape counselling interactions.

Various types of links with counselling services were discussed by interviewees in different situations. One counsellor told me that she felt it was crucial that programs did not just refer students to counsellors but also supported them within the program. Instructors in colleges thought they would invite counsellors into their classes to talk about their work and the counselling services available for students in the college. Workers in other situations needed information about the services available in their community that students could access or wished they had funds to offer services on site. A subtle, but important shift, prompted by the discussions about possible links, was that learners in full-time programs who spent time seeing a counsellor should be judged, not as missing time in the program, but as doing work to further their learning.

Recognition of the aptitudes and interests of literacy workers, within programs could permit some workers to focus more on the counselling needs of learners. Depending on the type of program, this might mean that such workers could have more responsibility for referral, or that they could provide support to other workers hearing disclosures or for learners who are accessing counselling. Such roles would certainly mean that workers would need opportunities for support and debriefing. However, even if some workers take on specific roles, all workers need to know something about the issues, so that counselling does not become something pushed off to one worker and so remain "outside" the literacy frame.

Few literacy programs currently explore possible links with programs which offer counselling, or even with counselling departments in their own institution. Programs rarely consider ways to build greater visibility for counselling services or more creative alternative possibilities for learners to access suitable counselling or other supports. Knowledge of counselling within a program and strong links with counselling services, internal or in another organization or organizations, would enable the program to offer more support to learners who have experienced trauma.

Possible Actions:

- Hold discussions within the literacy community and between the literacy and counselling providers about possible connections between literacy and therapy.
- Conduct assessments of the availability of appropriate counselling services in the community.

- Develop program capacity to do referrals and provide support to learners working with counsellors.
- Explore collaborative relationships between literacy programs and providers of counselling to make stronger links between education and counselling processes.
- Assess program staff skill levels in relation to supporting learners with counselling needs and hire/train staff if necessary.
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Vicarious Trauma

The eagerness with which literacy workers came to interview sessions, their tales learners who were struggling with memories or current experiences of trauma, suggested that workers' needs were not getting met elsewhere.

Some counsellors suggested that the literacy worker, like the women who experienced the trauma, also has a challenge to regain a sense of control, meaning and connection for herself. There is a growing literature about counsellors' experience of vicarious trauma. The impact might even be more severe for literacy workers than for counsellors, because they are less in control of the process of hearing about the trauma. Literacy workers have little control over when they will hear stories and have fewer boundaries to control how much they will hear and what to expect. A literacy worker may read a horrifying story in a journal, or may hear one from a learner at the end of the day when she is hurrying home. One counsellor spoke of "door knob" disclosures, that came when the woman had her hand on the door knob. Literacy workers agreed that description fit their experience and spoke of disclosures prefaced by the question "Have you got a minute?" They explained how hard it was to say they did not have a "minute," and once the disclosure began, how hard it was to put an end to the telling, even if they did not have time or energy to listen.

Some literacy workers spoke of having clear boundaries and having learnt a wide range of ways to look after themselves and leave the horrors behind. Others were surprised even by the idea that they might consider their own needs, set their own limits, or find ways to leave the exhaustion and horror of disclosures behind.

Possible Actions:

- Instigate discussion about issues of vicarious trauma amongst literacy workers.

- Provide training for paid and volunteer literacy workers in boundaries, self-care, and issues of the costs of supporting learners who have experienced violence.
- Allot time for debriefing and peer support meetings.
- Provide "supervision", or support, for workers who are providing counselling, for workers supporting learners who have been referred to counsellors, and for workers engaged with a learner/learners which trigger issues for the workers themselves.
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5. Responding to Impacts of Violence in Literacy

In this section I want to explore the range of issues which are not usually visible and which take energy away from the literacy learning process for many students who are survivors of trauma. Much current talk in literacy is focussed on "outcomes." This talk needs to shift to include the complexity of what many learners are dealing with. Much of the learning that has to take place, and which takes the energy of the learner, is not visible even to learners or workers, let alone planners and funders. Where "outcomes" include only the ability to read and write better, both workers and learners are likely to be frustrated, wondering why there is not more progress, rather than noticing the layers of learning which ARE taking place. We need to examine new possibilities for literacy practice, in light of observations of learners' struggles with the series of impacts of violence that affect their learning.

Presence

One literacy worker wrote to me about the experience of a student in her class:

> She thought she pretty much had sorted out her childhood but Math has brought it back BIG TIME. She is going to keep a journal - she's very articulate and observing. We are talking a lot as she struggles but the struggle is really extreme and I'm worried.... Yesterday she managed to blank completely for an hour so that she arrived too late to write a make-up test - now she's wondering if she really needed to miss the original test. She made arrangements the night before to get here at a particular time, she ate a particularly soothing breakfast - her partner knew this was THE PLAN for the

day then all of a sudden it was an hour later and she hadn't left. Later she remembered a conversation wi herself about what time class really started and so when she really needed et here! When she arrived she couldn't feel her lower extremities at all. A aple of times through the test she was having trouble breathing. I did everything I could - let her talk about it - gave her help with the questions to make it more like a class and not a test, etc., etc. but she was determined to go on with it. Finally she quit and left - she was okay I think - I urged her to figure out how to care for herself in the afternoon.

Therapists and counsellors I interviewed often spoke of experiences of trauma leading to dissociation. Therapists use this term to refer to a process whereby a person who is experiencing unbearable trauma distances herself from it. This strategy, learned at the time of the initial trauma, becomes an ongoing process which a survivor may unconsciously slip into when something triggers memory.

One caution I have about the concept of dissociation, and particularly some of the more medical interpretations of it as "disorder" or ailment, is the way in which it suggests that "normal" is to be present, and "abnormal" to be dissociated. This either/or approach can easily erase the complexity of degrees of presence and the wide range of factors which could lead to greater or lessor presence in any particular situation. As I stated earlier, it is important to avoid sliding into pathologizing learners as "ill" if they dissociate, and diagnosing who is dissociating and who is merely "daydreaming." I chose to use the word "presence" in order to focus on the nuances of presence, and to create a positive way of speaking about the challenge for learners to explore what hinders and supports their presence, rather than focussing learners' attention negatively on dissociation, or not paying attention, as a problem.

Literacy workers are very familiar with the idea that many learners have difficulty paying attention for any stretch of time, and that many often appear to be daydreaming or bored. This discourse of "inattention" can lead some literacy workers to identify those who are not paying attention as not serious students, or not motivated. Others might think about learning disabilities, intellectual disabilities, or fetal alcohol or attention deficit disorders. Still others might judge their own teaching as not interesting enough and be continually looking for ways to make the class or group more stimulating or interesting in order to hold the learners' attention better. Whatever the judgment as to the cause, the result is likely to be frustration for workers and learners alike. Greater efforts at stimulation may even be counter-productive to creating a relaxed learning environment. One instructor told me that she worked with many students who, although they were in the class regularly, frequently were so spaced out that they did not even recognize work that they had done as their own. She said that, just as missing schooling as children had meant that they did not get a good grasp of the

material overall, as adults they were also missing classes, even though they were physically in the classroom. So again, they were having trouble making meaning for themselves and understanding the whole. As a consequence, students often told her that they must be stupid because, if they were in class and still had not "got it", then there was no other explanation. This learner frustration makes it crucial to search for explanations which lead to new possibilities for learning.

Recognition by programs, that many learners have difficulty staying present for a variety of reasons, could become part of the everyday discourse in the programs. It could be mentioned when a student enters a program. The difficulty of staying present could become part of the talk about what will be happening in the class or group and part of staff and volunteer training. The concept could be normalized and space created for learners to notice when they are less present and what is contributing to it. Do they have crises happening in their life? Are they having nightmares and trouble sleeping? Are they uncomfortable? What do they think or feel about the topic of the class? Are they anxious and panicked? Has something triggered them and connected them to an earlier trauma (a tone of voice, the sound of chalk, the ringing of a bell, a quality of light...)? If spacing out is named as something many learners struggle with as they seek to learn literacy, and the program or class is a place which is accepting and supportive of the variety of challenges learners will be facing, then, rather than repeating childhood shame and covering up, learners can work at becoming more aware and conscious of what is happening for them. Learners should be encouraged to strengthen their awareness of their degree of presence, to build knowledge about what they need to stay present and what they learn from leaving, and learn to be able to ask for what they need to support their learning processes.

The issue of presence raises many questions. In literacy, can we help people learn to stay present? Can we help people to value and learn by their absences? Is that viable? When should it be talked about? Who would do it? The space and time needed to take on these issues is daunting. The limits of what a volunteer can be trained to do and can be expected to take on, need to be questioned. There would probably also be challenging questions about what could be taken on in a group or class. Learners who want to focus very firmly on literacy development might find a focus on such reflection frustrating and irrelevant. However, if reflection is carried out through reading and writing tasks - such as private journal writing - as well as more public, group discussion and writing activities, the relevance to the literacy work would be more apparent. Reflection could also take place in a separate program which would run before or alongside the literacy or academic activities. A recognition of the complex range for learners between being fully present and dissociated or "spaced out" can lead to many questions about how presence and absence are central parts of literacy learning.

Possible Actions:

- Find ways to incorporate talk about issues of presence as part of the program, this might include mention during intake procedures, reflection at the beginning of a course, or during the progress of a course, discussion during volunteer or staff training.
- Include curriculum which creates space for learners to learn to recognize their own level of presence and to explore what helps and hinders their presence in their own lives and in the classroom or group processes. Curriculum might enable learners to be more present and to learn from their spacing out.
- Assess whether programs currently work in ways which make it easier for learners to stay present and to reflect, and make changes necessary to enhance the process. For example, some concrete possibilities include encouraging learners to take a break when they would otherwise space out, to sit near the open door so that they can fully leave rather than leaving only in the mind, check ins at the beginning and end of class, a focus on creating as safe an environment as possible..
- Provide opportunities for learners to make the learning space their own - to make it comfortable, eg. blankets, quilts and a comfy chair would make it possible for learners to check out when they need to.
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"All or Nothing:" Living with Crises

Several therapists talked about survivors as frequently showing opposing patterns at the same time. For example, they spoke about women moving between taking complete control and abdicating control; complete trust and no trust at all; a defended self and no boundaries or self-protection at all. They spoke of women switching between extremes and having enormous difficulty with ambiguity. They suggested that it would be healing for women to learn to find middle ground. One therapist stressed that if one pattern is present you could expect to see the opposite also there.

Another aspect of "all or nothing" that therapists spoke about was a tendency for survivors to make enormous, "heroic" effort, but to be less likely to carry out daily ongoing work. I was told that the idea of daily effort gradually leading to change was often unusual to survivors. Those who grew up in violent and chaotic homes may have had little experience of seeing regular effort lead to results. As children, such learners are unlikely to have been given the support or space to work at

learning something regularly, or to do homework regularly and see the results of their own persistence. One therapist said survivors are often amazed that what they need to do is consistent daily activity. She said they are aghast that it is something so boring and routine that is required. When I asked literacy workers whether this resonated with how they saw the experience of learners, many said it was extremely familiar. Several instructors who work in full-time community college programs said that the description reminded them of many of their students who come in at the beginning of the year ready to make an enormous effort, convinced that this time they will just "do it." They all described their sinking feeling when they meet such students, because they expect them to drop out soon after, when they are not doing brilliantly. Several learners also described their own experience in ways that fit this description. Instructors are often frustrated, wondering how to help the students stay in for the long haul. Students are also frustrated, because they thought it would be different - this time they were going to work really hard. The insight that such students may not have had practice with the concept of daily work leading to change, or have knowledge of "middle-ground," suggests new ways to think about approaches to help them stay in a program and learn successfully.

Some people spoke of another dimension, of the "all or nothing" concept as "totalizing" which explained a tendency to move instantly from experiencing one example to concluding "it is always this way." For example, one mistake means "I always make mistakes, I am stupid and nothing will change it." Or, "You let me down once I can never rely on you, you always let me down, I will never trust you again over anything." Small failures are complete failures. Clearly this could be very problematic for literacy learning, undermining any possibility of seeing mistakes as part of learning and of continuing to practise writing or reading regularly.

Curriculum which could help to make "middle-ground" visible, and included more exploration of what leads to successful learning, would be useful to all learners. One literacy worker suggested that another way of characterizing and making "middle-ground" visible, is to think in terms of "good enough." Perhaps a variety of modes of helping learners to see their gradual progress would be useful. Portfolios of work, for example, could be used to help learners see the shifts in their own work for themselves. Mentors and role models might also be able to support learners, by describing times when they continued in the face of frustration and failures, revealing that although daily work may be boring, it is part of the process of reaching a goal.

All or nothing ways of relating to the world can mean that trauma survivors live with regular crises. Instructors talked a lot about the crises in learners' lives and the energy they consume. One literacy worker said "they are too busy being upset

to learn." Therapists and the therapeutic literature talk about how scary it can be for someone who is used to living in a state of crisis to live without crises. The tension of waiting for the next crisis creates a state of continual expectation, so that for some women it may be easier to provoke the crisis than live waiting for it. A group of workers described crises as a way of "putting off success and change." One learner said that after living with crisis all her life she had no sense of who she would be if she were not in crisis.

Possible Actions:

- Design curriculum to help learners recognize and explore middle-ground and learn more about how to learn and their own patterns of learning.
- Emphasize forms of recognition of progress which help learners to see the value of daily work, eg. portfolios.
- Support learners to understand the role of routine and guide them in creating their own routines which work for them.
- Experiment with a mentor program so that learners can support each other in the process of staying in for the "long haul."
- Provide support for learners in crisis and support groups to help learners look at their sense of themselves especially as their identity shifts.
- Conduct class or group discussions on the role of "failure" in learning, to help make visible that learning requires making mistakes. Encourage learners to establish a new relationship with making mistakes and to define for themselves what success looks like.
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Trust and Boundaries

Trust, or the attention required to assess whether it is safe to trust, is another of the issues which workers and counsellors spoke about as taking up energy and impeding the learners' presence in the program. One worker suggested that the energy expended to check out whether a person was trustworthy added time to the learning process. A survivor described the problem as more profound:

> The first thing I learned, in a long list of strategies to survive my childhood, was not to trust anybody. The second thing I learned was not to trust myself. (Danica, 1996, p.17)

If you cannot trust yourself then you cannot figure out whether to trust others because your gut or instinct is not to be relied upon - so you cannot know who to trust and who not to trust. You can also have problems with knowing whether to trust your own sense of danger. Therapists used the term hypervigilance to refer to the level of alertness that survivors may use to observe the tensions in a room. Many survivors I interviewed spoke of this alertness as valuable and argued that if such sensitivity could be learned without the pain usually associated with it, it would be a wonderful asset.

Herman talks about how the lack of trust that a survivor may feel can lead eventually to abusive interactions:

> The patient scrutinizes the therapist's every word and gesture in an attempt to protect herself from the hostile reactions she expects. Because she has no confidence in the therapists's benign intentions, she persistently misinterprets the therapist's motives and reactions. The therapist may eventually react to these hostile attributions in unaccustomed ways. Drawn into the dynamics of dominance and submission, the therapist may inadvertently reenact aspects of the abusive relationship. (Herman, 1992, p.139)

Herman seems to assume that the therapist always has benign intentions and that the survivor is wrong in her judgments. However, her words do alert literacy workers to continually question whether we are being trustworthy, and whether our behaviour in any way replicates abuse because we have authority.

I wonder about what it means to be trustworthy and the limits of how trustworthy we are in literacy. Are we reliable and do we always give feedback in a way that is not damaging? In literacy, it may be crucial to be careful in any interaction about honesty and to recognize that a learner's responses may include past history and more than a "reading" of the actual words. For example, when workers assure learners that they are happy to teach something several times, or tell a learner that she is "doing well," does the learner "scrutinize every word" and does that "exquisite attunement to unconscious and non-verbal communication" serve to tell a different message, perhaps of frustration, impatience or failure?

Many ways of working to help to build learners' trust in their own knowledge, trust in their ability to judge the safety of a situation and the trustworthiness of others, could be developed and used more consciously in literacy programming. Many processes which are already used by some teachers, such as journal writing, timed writing followed by reading aloud, and group work, might help to build such skill. Trust-building exercises would also be important to strengthen the possibility for taking controlled risks in a literacy setting.

I heard repeatedly from therapists and counsellors that to be trustworthy, workers had to learn to respect their own boundaries and the boundaries of others, and support those who do not have good boundaries to learn to create them. Counsellors spoke about the importance of workers coming to recognize when their own boundaries have been crossed, noticing their own anger as a guide to that, and learning to put back in place the clear limits that are necessary to avoid feeling burnt-out, "used" and angry at those who make demands. The ability to re-instate boundaries when they have slipped is an important skill to model for women who may not have learned even the simple right to keep boundaries. In contrast, literacy workers often spoke about how hard they found it to create any limits and boundaries for themselves. A typical example of workers' ambivalence was one worker's account of closing her door after class and trying to ignore when students knocked. When we talked about it, she realized that she had never given herself permission to tell students when she was and was not available to them and to ask them to respect her "boundary." Instead, she said she felt angry that they hammered on her door when she needed to get office work done Perhaps more often, workers talked about not even setting such basic limits, feeling unable to set any boundaries, feeling they had to stretch to meet their students' needs, which were too critical to be denied.

For workers, respecting the boundaries of learners may be especially hard with learners who do not maintain good boundaries themselves. Much therapeutic literature describes the connection between trauma and difficulties creating boundaries.

> This impaired ability to trust one's perceptions and act on them also extends to setting appropriate boundaries. The essence of sexual abuse is having one's most intimate boundary - the skin on one's body - violated. (Mitten & Dutton, 1996, p.134)

Some literacy workers spoke of trauma leading to building a "wall" or being completely exposed, and saw problems created from being over-defended or under-defended. Counsellors and therapists stressed that to be trustworthy was to avoid "rescuing" even when asked, as to do so is to collude in the suggestion that the survivor cannot act on her own behalf and can only be "saved" by someone else taking over.

An obvious aspect of boundaries must be clarity about touching and the negotiation of touch. A hand on the shoulder, a pat on the back, or a hug that may seem a supportive gesture for some, could be invasive and traumatic for others. That basic respect for the boundary between one person's body and another's is important if the classroom is to be a place where a survivor can relax and feel safe. Alternative ways - words and looks of encouragement - to show support and

encouragement or sympathy need to be found. The classroom offers quite a challenge for those who are not comfortable being too close to others, or close to men in particular. Working together at a computer or in a group at a table could be extremely threatening for some students. The proximity of an instructor coming up behind a student to help, or towering over a student who is sitting, could be a trigger. A male instructor would need to be especially sensitive to what might trigger students and take particular care around issues such as touch, closeness and relative height.

Possible Actions:

- More discussion of trustworthiness amongst instructors and program workers would lead to further exploration about the complexities of the issue.
- Curriculum to help learners to explore and build trust in their own knowledge and ability to learn...
- Trust building exercises in classes and groups...
- Training in sensitivity as regards trust and boundaries for paid and volunteer staff, and awareness building for learners.
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Safety and Telling Stories

Much good literacy practice includes learners writing about their own lives. Often learners are asked to write journals, sometimes these are "response" or "dialogue" journals where the instructor or facilitator writes a reply or reaction after each journal entry. Beginning literacy students are asked to tell a "language experience" story, where an incident from their own lives becomes the basis for their own reading. If learners feel they must be careful about what they reveal during these activities, then again, energy is being expended to take care about what to reveal and what not to reveal.

I am not suggesting that the more open learners are, or the more fully they feel able to tell their stories in the literacy classroom, the better. Instead, I want to draw attention to the energy that learners have to put into deciding what they will say or write and into worrying about whether they will be shamed. This tension and fear is another distraction from the task of developing the ability to read and write with ease. One therapist suggested that learners may be continually asking themselves "If I tell this, can you 'hear', or will I have to take care of you?" and "If I tell this, can you hear, or will you shame me?" Clearly, that doubt takes us

back to the question of trust. And when learners have built some trust that the class or group is a safe place to take risks in learning, they may be tempted to be more open with the stories of their lives. Disclosures make a demand on the instructor and on other learners to be able to "hear." Safety, in the literacy program, is a complicated concept. Some learners will want the program to be a safe place to tell their stories, others will want it to be a place where they are safe from violence or hearing disturbing accounts of violence in the lives of others.

In an attempt to make space for the harsh stories from learners' lives, some literacy programs may be at risk of focussing only on the pain. Several therapists stressed that if the focus of the literacy program is only on pain, a crucial opportunity to create a space for hope, for belief in the possibility of change and for discovering joy in learning is lost. Several therapists and literacy workers stressed the importance of knowing when to shift the energy in the classroom from pain to pleasure, and make space for fun and humour. One literacy worker drew on her own experience when she observed that children in violent or alcoholic families are often not allowed to be frivolous, to laugh and play, and that the humour in such homes is often hurtful teasing, where those with less power are exposed to put-downs and made the butt of the humour. This literacy worker thought that it was very healing to create possibilities for humour, joy and laughter that is not at anyone's expense. In her practice, she integrated a range of playfulness and fun with a non-judgmental atmosphere where learners could also speak about their pain. In contrast, one worker told me of a tutor who, when a learner had spoken of the horrors of her life, asked if she could find something "more cheerful to talk about" instead. Clearly such a negation of pain is horrifying, but a balance that allows also for joy may be crucial. Finding an appropriate balance between a space for the telling of pain and for experiencing pleasure and joy would be creative and extremely challenging for literacy workers.

Many literacy workers talked about the challenge to create a safe space in their programs. Some spoke of the limits of their power to create a space that would be experienced as safe by all learners and where they would be free of harassment or more subtle pressures. This was especially true where racism between groups created tensions, and where participants had connections and relationships outside the classroom. In such circumstances the power of the instructor to create a respectful and safe environment for all is often limited. In spite of the limitations, several workers spoke of their sense of responsibility for creating a safe classroom or program and were aware that, in their absence, a level of harassment took place that they did not allow. Some program workers spoke of how stressful and active a role they had to play to try to create a safer space. For others, I wonder whether that work goes almost unnoticed, but adds to their level of emotional exhaustion and bone-weary tiredness at the end of the week.

The level of energy required was particularly striking in the accounts from programs that work with people on the street. In those programs, the commitment to create a place that is safe for all learners requires an active "policing" role on the part of workers, to make sure learners do not bring weapons into the program and to remove anyone who is violent or abusive from the program. Although workers spoke of the importance of the safer space they were creating, they also spoke of the exhausting task of enforcing it and the tension of being the recipients of anger unleashed when they barred students from the program. They stressed that creating a safer space is an ongoing challenge which forces them to recognize the power dynamic in which they impose limits and struggle continually to maintain them, in the face of the threat of violence.

Possible Actions:

- Active creation of the program as a "safer" place and more awareness of the work involved. (Where appropriate also seeking support and awareness from the broader institution.).
- Training, discussion and support for workers, volunteers and learners in "boundaries" and "trustworthiness."
- Active work to build trust in a program.
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Conclusion

Seeing the complexity of awareness needed for both workers and learners around such issues as presence, trust, boundaries and crises, adds awareness to the question of why learning to read is such a difficult and lengthy process. Where the struggles around each of these issues are ones which a literacy learner has to carry out in private - to reveal her difficulties in these areas is to have herself judged as "abnormal" - then energy is required not only to struggle with the difficulties, but also to hide this struggle. It is crucial therefore that, within the literacy program, the range of what is normal be broadened and the discourse opened up to include awareness of the struggles that many learners, whether survivors or not, have in a broad range of areas. If the challenges learners face are made an active part of the curriculum then all learners can benefit from exploring what it takes to be fully present in the classroom and from the knowledge gained from the times of less presence; from discovering a deeper understanding of ambiguity and middle ground rather than staying with the stark contrasts of all or nothing; from considering crises and how to live both in and out of crisis; from examining questions of trust in terms of the possibility of trusting their own

knowledge and trusting others in the class or group not to judge and put them down; from learning to set boundaries and respect the boundaries of others; from deciding which stories to tell when; and from creating a safer place to learn.

The funding constraints and bureaucratic structures which shape literacy work are limiting the recognition that a whole range of learning is integral to the literacy learning process. Unless these challenges are recognized, the accessibility of literacy will be limited to those who can learn fast and easily.

Possible Actions:

- Promote discussion within the literacy community about the challenge for literacy workers to respond to so many complex issues. Questions such as: Should it be an expectation that workers take on so much? Will such a focus take attention away from reading and writing instruction?
- Create discourses about a range of possible approaches to increase awareness in the literacy program and classroom so that learners and literacy workers can:
    - explore what it takes to be fully present in the classroom and become aware of the knowledge gained from the times of less presence;
    - discover a deeper understanding of ambiguity and middle ground;
    - consider crises and how to live both in and out of crisis;
    - examine questions of trust;
    - learn to set boundaries and respect the boundaries of others;
    - decide which stories to tell when;
    - create a safer place to learn.
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6. Trauma and Holistic Programs

A whole person is comprised of mind, body, emotion and spirit. Recognition of these four aspects of the person came primarily from the First Nations' educators I talked to. They taught me about the concept of the medicine wheel and of balance between these four aspects. A healer made the concept most powerfully clear when she drew me the medicine wheel. To represent the lack of balance in North American society she drew most of the circle as the mind, two tiny sectors for the body and emotions, and an even smaller section for the spirit. She argued that the mind is given far too much weight in non-Aboriginal society. She helped me to

see that, given that lack of balance, it is not surprising that literacy learners, who are not judged as excelling in the mind, so often feel that they are not valued. When I described this off-balance wheel a survivor and advisor to the project used it to illustrate the concept that "healing" as an individual is problematic if we think of healing as learning to function better in a world that is "sick" and off-balance. If we think in terms of individuals gaining balance and see learning as a holistic process, engaging the whole person, it opens possibilities for more creative programming[7].

It may be important to recognize that not everyone who signs on for literacy learning or teaching wants to participate in fully holistic programming. It would not be appropriate to try to include body, mind, emotion and spirit extensively within every program. However, minimal acknowledgment of all aspects of the person is crucial in all programming. Recognition of all elements can take place even through many minor changes in programs.

Instructors also need to be aware that learners may also be working with some aspects of themselves outside the literacy program and offer support so that this may enhance the literacy learning in the program. For example, a First Nation student may be taking part in a traditional ceremony outside the literacy program. That rekindling of spirit might be crucial for her literacy learning and the effect could be enhanced if the instructor acknowledges such "work" and creates "space" for the learner to write or speak about it in the program, if she chooses. At the very least, the instructor needs to recognize that this is complementary work, rather than seeing any infringement on attendance as indicating that the student is not serious about her studies.

Body

Literacy programming needs to be designed and carried out with recognition of the damage to the body caused by trauma which impedes participation (eg. health problems, injuries which making sitting difficult or make a woman embarrassed to attend class), but also with awareness of the potential of the body to enhance the learning process. What happens to literacy programming if the body is taken into account? Program planning and facilitation could be enhanced by a recognition

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[7] I am deeply grateful to many First Nation's educators who introduced me to these concepts and made this entire last section possible. An early conversation with Ken Norquay of the Native Friendship Centre in Brandon, Manitoba alerted me to the possibility of a different concept of "healing" than that offered by the therapeutic literature I was reading. Listening to Priscilla George, Jennifer Wemigwans, Sally Gaikezheyongai and Nancy Cooper in Toronto gave more depth to my understanding. Finally Aline LaFlamme in Yellowknife, Northwest Territories, drew me pictures and brought home the urgent necessity of new, truly holistic and healing approaches for literacy learners of many backgrounds.

that learners have bodies that take up space. More awareness of the physical space within which learning is occurring and the ways the body can be drawn in to enhance learning would be part of a holistic program. If there are opportunities for people to move and to explore taking up space, as part of the learning process, they may be more able to stay present and learn.

Many survivors talk of the difficulty they have in believing they should "take up space". In many programs there is little notice taken of the body and the space for the program is inadequate and the prevailing attitude is that literacy programs have to "make-do" with what is available. I wonder whether programs could be more supportive for women seeking to claim the right to take up space. What does it say to women that there may seem to be little space for them even in the program, that the programs themselves seem to have no right to take up space and, in times of financial cut backs, perhaps no right to exist at all. How can we create the sort of literacy learning spaces which will help students feel a right to exist and to learn?

I have been questioning how literacy programming could look different if priority was given to making the centre or classroom a place where learners could feel their right to take up space and feel physically comfortable and safe. Some basics would include ensuring enough space between students so that they feel comfortable, freedom from people walking in or overhearing discussion, space to store their own work (particularly confidential journals). A setting that felt warm and comforting, where learners feel ownership, not like a traditional school classroom, would be especially valuable for those who experienced violence in the school setting.

It is challenging to imagine a broad range of ways to involve the body in the learning process. One possibility might be to include exercises which involve movement. I have found, in workshops and classes, that whenever I get people standing and moving, the classroom comes alive again. Possibilities for expression using modelling clay, paints, music or graffiti could help learners to discharge the tension in their bodies. Even the freedom to get up and go out of the room, or to get a cup of coffee may be a crucial physical movement to lessen stress and discomfort.

Mind

Much of the literature about the legacy of experiences of violence looks at whether the brain is changed from the experience. But in spite of a myriad of articles about the changes to the brain and the way in which memories of trauma are stored, my questions about memory and ability in the adult learning process were not answered by the literature I read or the therapists I interviewed. In the

literature there were suggestions about trauma causing "damage" and links between trauma and learning disability. For example:

> Physiological hyperarousal interferes with the capacity to concentrate and to learn from experience. Aside from amnesias about aspects of the trauma, traumatized people often have trouble remembering ordinary events as well. Easily triggered into hyperarousal by trauma-related stimuli, and beset with difficulties in paying attention, they may display symptoms of attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder. After a traumatic experience people often lose some maturational achievements and regress to earlier modes of coping with stress. ..... in adults it is expressed as excessive dependence and in a loss of capacity to make thoughtful, autonomous decisions. (van der Kolk, 1996, p.422).

Though the implications of such research for literacy learning raised many questions, the unproblematic creation of those who have experienced trauma as "other" was disturbing. One group of literacy learners were very clear that they did not like the concept of "damage" to the mind because they felt that it suggested no hope, and was diminishing.

I asked various counsellors whether trauma affects current memory and if so, is it permanent. Several said that they were asking themselves the same questions. A key question for literacy programming is whether it would make any difference to literacy workers or to learners to know whether psychological difficulties with learning come from trauma. Would it lead to different ways to teach? Perhaps the issue compares with learning disability. For some learners, the label of learning disability has been helpful for them to free themselves from feeling stupid. For others it can seem medical, just another label, which does not help them learn. Similarly, a suggestion that problems with memory may be a result of trauma might make it easier for some learners to feel less stupid. Other learners might experience such a judgment as negative.

One learner I interviewed said eloquently that damage felt like a "put down" and sounded unfixable. She said that abuse causes so much pain that the mind blocks the pain, and so learning may also be blocked. She felt that the way in which the mind protects itself suggested that far from not working, the mind is working brilliantly. She said that she felt her mind was filled with all the ways in which she was reacting to the violence and that took energy away from new learning:

> My mind is already being used, my mind is not damaged, my mind is busy.

Sandra Butler refers to this "busy-ness" as a natural and healthy response to prolonged stress that is a consequence of trauma, which requires various coping

behaviours that result in increased difficulty in concentration (Butler, 1992). She calls this "trauma stress." Several learners stressed how much difficulty they had learning during crises and suggested that it would have been helpful to have been told that was common, so they did not blame their own stupidity.

Perhaps a crucial factor which can be addressed through literacy programming is the legacy of abuse that leaves many women feeling that learning is not for them, that they are only good for sex. Many counsellors told me that childhood sexual abuse seems to lead to either a "bad girl" or "good girl" scenario. "Good girls" try to be super good, they work to be perfect in school and escape into the "safety" of school and the mind rather than the body. Some who have experienced severe trauma do extremely well in academic work. "Bad girls," seem to "believe" that they are only good for sex, as they were often told. They seem to give up on using the mind. This suggests that perhaps a key aspect of the mind that can be addressed in literacy programming is helping learners to shift their own sense that they don't have a mind that works, or that counts. Several students talked about the messages they received about their stupidity. For example, one learner spoke of the way her husband put her down:

> You are stupid, I can't believe it, you have no idea, on and on... The body language, I can't believe....
> At first I'd fight back... but after a while, you can only take it for so long, I'd feel like I was shrinking. I started to believe it. It made me scared to ask for help or try to learn, I thought I couldn't learn. So I didn't even try
>
> I was raised basically like that, the men are the breadwinners and the women stay home. Kept home. I heard the same things, you can't do it...
> I was scared to open the text book, I was so intimidated. I didn't want to look in it. It took me about seven weeks to open the book. ..... I closed it, I can't do it...
>
> I felt stupid, how stupid can someone be, not to know.....

Other learners have suggested that what they need is a program to help them: "learn what a mind is" and learn that they "have a mind." I wondered what such a program would look like and whether it could help learners who have come to believe they do not have a mind.

A layered, integrated curriculum might help learners see that they have a mind and help them to "play" with learning. Play could make learners feel childlike, which might feel like a put-down, or it could make learners feel vulnerable, but it might free learners from the terror of being judged and judging themselves for making mistakes. Learners in every group I talked to told me about the value of learning

about how they learn, of understanding that feeling stupid is a product of abuse, of learning that anxiety and "trauma stress" stopped them concentrating. So learning more about different ways of learning and blocks to learning might also be valuable.

One group of learners argued vehemently about whether a course about "learning to learn" should precede literacy learning or take place at the same time. They all worried that a course had to be carefully framed; otherwise it could easily seem like a put-down, a suggestion that they were not doing their lives right, or were not even ready for literacy class. I wondered about possibilities that combined both "before" and "during," such as an intensive first few weeks and then an ongoing support group while learners were taking part in literacy courses. A focus on building a strong sense of self as a learner might avoid some of the sense of put-down and be seen as useful by all learners.

Emotions

Emotions, or feelings, also play a big role for the survivor, yet in the literacy program there is often not a lot of space for emotions. Physical violence may leave visible wounds, but the emotional or mental effects are also present. Emotional or mental abuse also undermines the sense of self.

One counsellor said that she felt that many of the learners were "too busy getting upset to learn". That felt very familiar to me. I knew what she was talking about, I had seen many learners that I could describe in that way. Another therapist talked about "difficulties with feelings." She said that many survivors have a fear of feelings while internally they struggle with intense sadness, vulnerability and enormous anger. Such a complex mix of feelings can make it easier to bypass or deny the feelings of sadness and fear and go straight to anger. This can mean that a survivor shows no feelings and then suddenly blows up. A well of feelings that cannot be easily expressed may mean that a survivor is "overreacting," as the feeling can be in response to past as well as present issues. Learning how to respond respectfully to such a complex mix of emotions is hard, as literacy workers need to both avoid dismissing the emotions that seem more "childlike," and avoid getting hooked and "overreacting" in response. It may be challenging to avoid shaming or blaming a learner, or suggesting that their reaction is inappropriate, while also recognizing that the emotion may not all be in relation to the current situation.

One therapist stressed the importance of literacy workers developing the "capacity to witness." She reminded me that survivors may be depressed and suicidal. Observing people who are feeling desperate can be very hard. She suggested that holding on to a belief that things will get better, and supporting the woman in finding ways to be with herself in despair that were not harmful, were two ways

that workers could be supportive. One learner stressed that it does not work to tell literacy learners that they should just "leave their emotion at the door" as she was told in her program. Learners (and workers) need space for feelings within the program and places to go outside the program when the feelings are "too much" for themselves or for others to deal with in the class or group. As part of literacy work, learners could work with their feelings, learning to recognize them, drawing, talking and writing about their feelings.

Spirit

In my reading I came across the concept of "soul murder" (Shengold, 1989). It was used to describe people who have been severely abused and brutalized. Initially I found the concept disturbing - it seemed like another description of "damage" and another way to make people "other" and outside. But the concept stayed with me as it did seem to capture the way in which some people who have been severely abused seem to see themselves as outside the human compact. When a First Nations' group of instructors talked about students whose "spirits have left" I realized that this talk about the soul or spirit was important. Yet I struggled with a sense that I would be laughed at by non-Aboriginal people if I tried to say that literacy work and the spirit had anything to do with each other. I was pleasantly surprised, then, when I did speak about it in a workshop and several participants picked it up and said how crucial they felt it was to recognize the spirit when we are teaching literacy.

It is not new to literacy workers to talk about learners feeling stupid, but the depths of feeling "pathetic" or worthless and the block that can create to learning may be something we have not adequately addressed. There are often debates about self-esteem and literacy and which comes first. Does work on improving literacy skills improve self-esteem or is work on self esteem needed to enable literacy learning to take place? I want to look at the ways they are intertwined and need to be addressed together, if learners who have been traumatized are going to have a sense of themselves as able to learn. I want to question whether thinking in terms of the spirit would help us to notice approaches different from traditional self-esteem work. Maybe we need to look at what helps a person believe they are worthy and sacred, and how specific beliefs which block learning - such as a learner's belief that she is stupid or must not make mistakes - can be turned around. How can we, in literacy, help someone to believe they are not stupid, believe that it is all right to make mistakes, trust that they can learn and begin to move from feeling badly about themselves?

Creating Balance

Thinking about the four aspects of the person has challenged me to think about how the "damage" to each area I have heard about in my interviews could also

lead to new possibilities for literacy work. A focus on body, mind, emotions and spirit could be far more than just addressing "damage." It could lead to a process where each aspect of the person was fully engaged in a creative learning process. If literacy could be more holistic, it might support a woman's process of "healing," of integration, and lead to a highly successful educational process.

Creating models for such programming would be a challenge. A further question remains: whether such models should be offered only as an alternative in literacy, leaving the mainstream unchallenged, or whether such shifts should influence literacy learning for a wide range of learners.

Possible Actions:

- Conceptualize a fully holistic program that incorporates mind, body, spirit and emotions.
- Create curriculum for such a program exploring incorporating movement, playing with intellectual mind games, working with feelings and awareness of feelings, activities which recognize the spirit and rebuild a sense of value and worth.
- Explore the impact of creative use of space to help learners "take up space" and feel safe in the learning centre.
- Try out new courses or support groups to help learners which could focus on issues such as learning to learn, looking at what hinders learning....
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